

## Two specialized license plates for Bay Area and Sierra environment fail to win approval

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California motorists already have Yosemite Valley, Lake Tahoe and a firefighter gracing their license plates. Images of the Golden Gate Bridge and a bear wandering through the Sierra Nevada mountains won't be joining them.

Two campaigns to use specialized license plates to raise money for parks, wildlife and environmental restoration projects in the Bay Area and Sierra Nevada have been abandoned for lack of public interest.

Under state law, sponsors of such commemorative license plates must sign up 7,500 prepaid orders in one year or the DMV won't produce the plates — which cost \$50 a year.

But a proposed plate that would have featured a small image of the Golden Gate Bridge and whose proceeds would have helped Bay Area open space projects sold only 550 copies. A second plate, which featured a bear and a mountain, would have funded projects of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency. It sold just 278 copies.

Everyone who ordered the plates will be mailed a refund.

"The economy was a huge issue. People aren't going to part even with \$50 if they are concerned about the future of their job," said Amy Hutzal, who coordinated the Golden Gate plate program with the California Coastal Conservancy, a state agency in Oakland that hoped to raise \$1 million a year from the effort.

"People just weren't looking to take on additional costs, even if they believed in the cause."

Another major factor was a state law, signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2006, that limits the size of the art work on license plates. Prompted by concerns from the California Highway Patrol that officers were having a hard time reading the license plate numbers, the law required that any logo be no larger than two inches by three inches — about the size of a business card — and not overlap the license numbers.

"We heard from a lot of folks that the smaller design is simply not as appealing," said Jim Branham, executive director of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. "When you have Yosemite

plates, Tahoe plates and whale tail plates out there, people are kind of used to that. And our design has a different look."

Most states have specialized license plates that help pay for things from universities to parks. In the past decade, the 10 main specialized plates in California have together raised about \$25 million to \$30 million a year. The whale tail plate, for example, helps fund beach cleanups and other programs run by the California Coastal Commission. Other plates fund state arts programs, veterans programs, Yosemite National Park projects and restoration around Lake Tahoe.

Since the law passed requiring smaller logos, no new specialized plates have secured the necessary 7,500 orders. Efforts to create new plates to fund AIDS research, Rotary International, the Girl Scouts and the Ronald Reagan Memorial Library all have fallen short.

With the bad economy, even sales of approved plates are crashing.

In 2009, California motorists purchased 58,246 specialized plates, a drop of 44 percent from the 103,251 purchased in 2007.

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